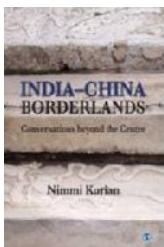


Review: *India-China Borderlands: Conversations Beyond the Centre*

Reviewed by Jonathan Z. Ludwig (Rice University)



Nimmi Kurian. 2014. *India-China Borderlands: Conversations Beyond the Centre*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd. xix + 175. Maps, abbreviations, preface, acknowledgments, references, index, about the author. ISBN: 978-81-321-1351-5 (hardcover, 49.95USD).

When most people think of China, they often think of Beijing, Shanghai, and the other heavily populated and highly developed coastal regions of the country. When considering India, they most often think of the large cities of Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata. In *India-China Borderlands* Nimmi Kurian, a member of the Asian Borderlands Research Initiative's network of scholars, asks us instead to consider the frontier parts of both nations: where they meet, where they are most sparsely populated, yet also most ethnically diverse, and where they are generally the most economically underdeveloped.

Relations between India and China have most often been examined at the nation-to-nation or the city-to-city level, and exclusively as defined by the centers, with the peripheries all but ignored. Kurian's goal in *India-China Borderlands* is to rectify this neglected region of study and comparatively examine how the Chinese and Indian governments treat their hinterlands and how they are attempting to develop them. Where the two countries meet is particularly interesting because the borders are considered inherently flexible by their residents. This relates to the large number of ethnic groups who at times feel closer to their counterparts on the other side of the border than to those of the majority ethnic group who live in and rule from the center. Meanwhile, the center of both nations deem them to be absolute and inviolable geopolitical demarcations, at least in so far as they are able to agree on where the actual borders should be located. The centers fear that these areas are unstable, so Delhi

¹Ludwig, Jonathon Z. 2016. Review: *The Emperor Far Away: Travels at the Edge of China*. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 40:455-458.

and Beijing have laid out plans to stabilize them, reducing regional disparities and raising the socio-economic profiles of their respective sides of the border.

The present study is divided into five chapters: 'Fences and Frames: Narrativising the Borderlands', 'B/Ordering Spaces: Governing Multi-ethnic Borderlands', 'Barriers to Bridges: Geoeconomic Text', 'Geopolitical Subtext, Competing or Compatible?' 'Interrogating India-China Subregional Visions', and 'Fugitive Frames: Rewriting Research Peripheries'.

Kurian starts her introductory chapter with a basic presentation of the problem to be discussed. Both China, through its Western Development Strategy, and India, through its Look East policy as laid out in the policy document Northeast Vision 2020, have pushed state-directed investments on the sub-regional level in the border regions of their respective countries in both economic and socio-political spheres, utilizing a "prosperity discourse" and an infusion of resources. This book asks us to consider whether and, if so, how these separate plans coincide and, in so doing, to examine three research questions: 1) How can the focus of problem-solving be shifted to the sub-regional/ local level and on issues specifically relevant to these lands? And what institutions can be created to ensure shared risk and reward? 2) How can China and India individually balance sub-regional economics with legitimate geopolitical concerns especially when they are not easily reconciled, always keeping in mind the ultimate goal of sharing a peaceful border? 3) How can theories from disparate sets of academic disciplines be brought together to study the borderlands? Ultimately Kurian hopes that the borderlands can be at the center of a new dialogue between China and India by providing answers to the first two questions with research derived from the third.

Kurian proceeds with a historical overview of the challenges of state control and state-building initiatives as seen through the lens of the numerous empires that tried to bring these contemporary borderlands under their control and of the cosmopolitanism that traditionally existed here from the time of the Silk Road when people freely interacted with each other across any borders. She discusses

how both China and India have approached these historical legacies and their questions and challenges in trying to deal with present realities. In particular, she investigates how they approach economic and cultural issues in trying to balance the past with the future.

From here she moves into a discussion of how China and India have separately used the borders as bridges to influence others, particularly the lands immediately across the borders. In most instances this influence, which has the potential to be transformational, centers around the three Ts: trade, tourism, and transport. The important point she makes here is that decisions concerning all these issues come from the center. The borderlands themselves are not part of the decision-making process - everything is top-down. She concludes the third section by stating that this needs to change - the borderlands themselves, through a bottom-up process, must be part of this discussion moving forward.

In the penultimate chapter, Kurian poses the question of whether India's and China's sub-regional visions for the borderlands will coincide or not, with the implicit desire that they do. In order for this to happen, China and India will have to agree on issues such as what will define peace in the region, common values that will inform future cooperative decisions, and how to define the sub-regions. Furthermore, she again notes that both nations will need to de-center control of the borderlands, allowing both governance and diplomacy to stem from the regions themselves. Her hope is that from this, regional institutions will spring up that can and will work across the borders more effectively than has been done from the center, where larger geopolitical issues can scuttle local desires and needs.

While the first four chapters are geared toward policy-making decisions and directed at those who wish to make them or become involved in making them, the final chapter is geared toward strictly academic questions and members of the academy who ask them. Namely, Kurian sets out to create a new discourse through which the borderlands will no longer be marginalized in favor of studying larger players and actors. She hopes instead to create an alternative means of study in which scholars will re-imagine the borderlands as actors

in the decision-making process, who are able to manage and plan for their own futures.

This book represents a strong academic study of the Sino-Indian borderlands and is important reading for anyone interested in this vital and potentially unstable region. If there are drawbacks, then there are arguably two: first, the use of academic jargon, rather than a clear, jargon-free style, makes this a rough read in spots and could make this a difficult read for anyone outside the academy, for example, policy makers, who are looking for additional information on these lands. In addition, it would be a stronger study if there were an in-depth discussion of the Sino-Indian border disputes, their history, and the potential for continued disputes to disrupt the progress that has been made in the borderlands and what they might mean for future cooperation and coordination across the border. After all, it would seem to the casual observer of the region that much of the driving force behind government investment in these lands is a fear of what could come from the other side. Despite these two issues, for regional experts or for those who wish to become regional experts, this is a very good place to continue or begin their studies.